

DORCHESTER UNITED CHURCH

WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

OCTOBER 1st, 2023

WATER IN THE WILDERNESS EXODUS 17:1-7

Dateline Libya, North Africa. . . September 2023, the eastern city of Derna almost disappeared under the heavy rainfall and flooding that the Mediterranean storm Daniel brought on the weekend of September 9th. On the 11th two dams collapsed sending 30 million cubic meters of water into already inundated areas.

Bridges were destroyed, roads were blocked, and food supply chains were severely disrupted causing food shortages. After years of conflict, poverty and displacement this latest disaster will create an untenable situation for the people of Libya who have been living in the midst of two warring factions.

Libya's Red Crescent reported that over 11,000 people perished in the disaster while the survivors continue to appeal for help from the United Nations and other relief agencies. The destructive power of water reminds us that we are all living on the edge of some massive calamity. Water comes, does its destructive work, and then withdraws. That's what water does.

Global warming and the climate crisis aside, we prefer to ignore what is happening all around us until some dire reality breaks us out of our complacency. For the Ancient Israelites in their long

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sojourn through the wilderness such a reality was the lack of water.

The English lyrical poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 'The Rime (or ballad) of the Ancient Mariner,' one of his more memorable poems evokes what may well be an ironic commentary on the plight of the Israelites. The mariner looks out at the vast ocean all around him and says,

*Water, water, everywhere, and all the boards did shrink,  
water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink.*

The wilderness is a vast and empty place and the Israelites, like the Ancient Mariner, have been wandering over its vastness. But little do they realize that in its very expansiveness there are resources that the God of the wilderness can provide.

There is water in the wilderness, in the rock and under the sand, subterranean. Modern Israel has found a way to exploit the vast potential of the desert and are able to provide large quantities of water not only for themselves but for their neighbors. The oceans are warming, and the forests are burning, and we forget at our peril, as did the Israelites, that God has not abandoned us.

Perhaps, we, too, need a Moses to appeal on our behalf, a leader whom we are ready to get rid of, but one who will intercede for us. God's chosen, the faithful and obedient one, the one who does the will of Yahweh is always seen as a threat. Overcome by shortsightedness and lack of vision we find a scapegoat upon whom we can place the burden of our complaints. The story of the Exodus

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is a salutary reminder that we, too, are wandering and both the ocean and the wilderness have the potential to overwhelm us.

We have become the victims of a deep longing, a thirst for God to intervene. Water has become a symbol of what we are yearning for, and every generation must define its longing. But the ethos of that longing cannot be in the past. Israel had left Egypt but could not break free from the powerful hold it continued to have over them.

Is there an Egypt in our lives? If there is, then the rock will yield no water. The man of God will lift up his staff and strike, but the wilderness will continue to have its way with us. To see God with the eyes of faith is what the Ancients could not do. It is what we still are unable to do. God's gracious presence is here among us and unless we leave our past behind, we will miss the freshness of the divine grace.

Wilderness is a state of mind. Someone said that God leads but not always to an oasis. We must rethink how God leads. Under the guidance of Yahweh, the people will cross over safely, but Moses had to remind them that it was God they were testing and not him. What they were longing for was already within their grasp. Moses, true leader that he is, must go ahead of them. But he will not go alone. True leadership is not the activity of a single individual.

Moses must take some of the elders with him. They carry with them their testimony of the past. That's the role of the witness, and that's probably why we know that the event at Horeb did take place. Jesus

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walked along the lakeshore when he issued his call. But it was not to a single individual. Much is made of Peter's role in the Gospel, but we remember how headstrong and impetuous he was. It would have been quite different if he were the only disciple.

The evidence is there but who will corroborate it. The story of the Exodus from Egypt, from slavery to freedom, the story of how God's generous nature overcomes our selfish motives is why we read it today. It is important for the story line to know that God did intervene, that the Creator is the one who provides in spite of all our complaining. It is important for us today to know that the great provider is the host at a table of love, and we can be assured that all our longings will be met at this table for it is here that grace flows freely and we can drink and be refreshed, we can eat and be satisfied. AMEN

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